

Kirsty Mitchell – Creating Her Wonderland

Described as a multifaceted artist, award-winning British fine art photographer Kirsty Mitchell draws on her past careers in fashion design and costume making to produce images of beguiling dream-like worlds, all shot in the English landscape surrounding her home. Mitchell describes her approach as 'Fantasy for Real', spending months meticulously handcrafting her characters' costumes and props to coincide with the bloom of wild flowers and the seasonal extremes of her local environment. Some pieces have taken up to five months to create every element by hand and over a year to plan. The photographs are entirely real, assembled like mini film sets, and shot first hand on location in all weathers. The series has been documented extensively, with behind the scenes photographs and films to demonstrate this.

After a decade of working as a fashion designer, in 2008 Mitchell returned to her early love of photography and began a new and deeply emotional connection with the medium during the treatment of her mother's terminal cancer. Following her tragic loss, nine months later Kirsty immersed herself into what became an unexpected and life-changing series entitled *Wonderland*, intended as a book in her mother's memory. The sudden international recognition for her work led Mitchell to leave her fashion career behind in 2011, to pursue her future as a fine art photographer, with articles being published by BBC News, Vogue Italia, Harper's Bazaar, The Guardian, The Telegraph, Spiegel Online, Blink Magazine and Germany's 'Stern' magazine to name a few.



Gammelyn's Daughter © Kirsty Mitchell



The Pure Blood Of A Blossom © Kirsty Mitchell

After five-and-a-half years, Wonderland was completed in November 2014, immediately winning two international awards. The coverage of the series continued to grow with over 300,000 followers all over the world connecting both with the artworks, but also the accompanying autobiographical 'diary' written by Mitchell of her shoot experiences and the narratives behind the images. The entire project, including the finished artworks, diaries and documentary photography of its creation, are due to be published as a highly anticipated book dedicated to Kirsty's mother. After a number of offers from publishers Kirsty decided to launch her own Kickstarter campaign for the book, in collaboration with top UK book designer Stuart Smith.

The campaign launched on 10 September 2015, immediately smashing its 70k goal in under 10 hours. After 28 days, it became the most funded photobook in the history of the website raising £334k from supporters all over the world. In 2018, the first major museum show of the entire Wonderland series opened at Fotografiska in Stockholm - one of the world's most important museums of contemporary photography. It received record-breaking audience numbers.

In 2019, after a year of planning, Mitchell began shooting a new series inspired by the events in her personal life between 2015-2017, when she gave birth to her first child and eight months later was diagnosed with breast cancer. The project is an even greater undertaking than Wonderland, as the photographs will also be accompanied by fine art films of each scene. It is expected to be several years in creation, with the first prints due for release later this year.

We spoke to Mitchell about her work and inspiration.

For more information, visit: kirstymitchellphotography.com



You worked in the fashion industry before becoming a photographer. Can you tell us what led you to change your career?

Sadly, the reason is because my mother died of a brain tumour. She was my best friend, and losing her within a matter of months was such a profound shock that my world completely fell apart. Suddenly nothing mattered anymore, fashion seemed fickle, pointless. I spiralled into depression and was unable to vocalise the depths of my loss. I felt it physically as well as mentally, and for some strange reason photography became the way I was able to channel my grief. Real life was so unbearable that out of nowhere I just picked up a camera and began forging a new alternative world in the heart of the woods near my home. It quickly became an obsession and was the only place I felt safe, where I could express all the emotions I was unable to explain to anyone else. It was all I could think of while I sat at my design job in London, I counted the hours until I could get home and carry on working on the next costume or prop. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore, and one day went to work as normal and ended up quitting without any savings or plan. I gave up everything to follow my heart and produce a book in my mother's memory. I had no idea how I'd do it, I'd never even sold a print before, but once you lose someone you love so much the things you used to be scared of just melt away.



The Journey Home © Kirsty Mitchell



When I look at your art, the colour is so striking. How do you plan all of the aspects of your work to complement the colours, the tone and give such an impact?

Wonderland was inspired by a lot of my childhood memories. I grew up in Kent (known as the garden of England). Our home was surrounded by bluebell woods, bright yellow rape seed fields, woods that changed colours with the seasons. With my characters it was vital to me that they looked like they had always existed in their environments; that they were utterly believable and almost symbiotic to their setting. So carefully matching the colours of these places with their clothes and make-up was a really important factor. I'd dye fabrics to match the colour of the flowers, we'd have fresh cuttings of the flowers next to the model while her make-up was being applied to make sure the colour was the same. Everything was done in camera for real, none of the colours were changed in post production.



The Last Door of Autumn © Kirsty Mitchell

Your magical locations are stunning. How do you source them?

I often get asked this and the simple answer is you need to put in the work and walk, walk, walk. After I lost my mum, the only way I could process and calm myself down was to lose myself in nature. The more remote the place, the better chance you have of finding something undiscovered. I'd walk in all seasons, I'd take my camera and every now and then I'd discover something interesting, but often I'd then revisit it throughout the year documenting how it looked in summer, snow, autumn. In one case I waited two years for the right moment, in another I stumbled on an incredible bluebell wood but of course had no time to design and make everything for a picture before the flowers died. So I had to wait a whole year to return prepared for a shoot.



The Secret Locked In The Roots Of A Kingdom © Kirsty Mitchell



Gammelyn's Daughter - a Waking Dream © Kirsty Mitchell

Which artists do you admire?

Gregory Crewdson, Alexander McQueen (who I used to work with), Mark Rydan, Ray Caesar, Cooper & Gorfer.

What inspires you and how do you plan your initial ideas for a composition?

My work is entirely about storytelling and it is always autobiographical, in the sense that it is deeply rooted in personal experience. It is my therapy, it is something I physically have to get out of my body and into the world. I don't think I have ever sat down and tried to think of a 'nice picture'. Instead I have a sea of images genuinely surging inside me, which at times feels completely overwhelming, I wish I could create them more quickly in order to just get them out and move on to the next one. My work is fantastical, but it is born from vivid memories and highly emotional personal experiences, that is why I always write about the meaning of my work alongside the images. The scenes in Wonderland are best described as meditations on old fairy tale illustrations and childhood memories mixed with my adult grief and spiritual connection with nature. The memory of my mother (who was an English teacher) reading to me, was a 'safe space' that I found myself regressing to after she'd died. Once I have a scene / character in my mind, it almost immediately appears to me as the finished picture. I then find myself in the daunting position of having to work backwards from that perfect vision to make everything in the picture myself, all by hand.

The Storyteller © Kirsty Mitchell



Can you talk us through your process and how you prepare for each shot?

Every picture is different and in some cases with my new series it is taking me over a year to make a single image. I never create one-off pictures, they are always part of a big series that spans years to make. So I start with a strong and clear storyline, then each scene has a purpose and is made chronologically. Each scene comes to me vividly as a finished image, it's kind of burned into my brain before I begin, then that becomes an obsession which will take me months to create in real life. I make all the costumes, props and sets myself by hand, I also design the hair and make-up. For this I make mood boards and will even create digital mock-ups to explain the look to the hair and make-up artist. Once I've made the costume and props, the search begins for the location. Once we have the location, we then begin planning what time of year the picture will be shot. Wonderland was almost entirely shot outside in the forests and field near my home. My new series is a completely different production level, which is more like making a full-scale movie. We have travelled to locations around the country and hired huge industrial buildings to build sets in - it's very different from my earlier work.

The Queen's Centurion © Kirsty Mitchell





Euphaeidae © Kirsty Mitchell

Your work often involves complex costumes and locations. Have there been any obstacles when striving for your vision?

Yes, endlessly. None of this has come easy, every single picture has had its challenges. This is another reason I documented the creation of the project, so people understood the struggle behind its creation and could see how everything was done for real. It's pretty heart stopping spending months on beautiful delicate costumes and sets, and then having to transport them to hard-to-reach locations and set them out in the notorious English weather. We've done shoots in the spring where it's hailed on us, we've had gale force winds blow down sets, torrential rain on a model strapped to the side of a bridge, I even accidentally sunk so deep into the mud of a lake I had water up to my neck trying to take a picture! But actually this is part of the magic, because nature often throws such a curve ball into a picture that it can end up being that very element which becomes the making of the piece. It gives it an energy and life that could never have happened in a studio. Most of all it's that adrenaline that makes the experience of being able to step into the picture for real so addictive. That's why I gave up everything to follow my heart and become an artist...because nothing in my life had ever compared to how it made me feel.

The Ghost Swift © Kirsty Mitchell



The Stars Of Spring Will Carry You Home © Kirsty Mitchell

What are you working on currently?

My new series is even more emotional than my previous work. After years of creating Wonderland I felt like I had overcome so much, and on Christmas Eve 2015, just days after the first-edition book production was delivered, I gave birth to my first and only child, a little boy called Finch. The book was a smash hit, it sold out immediately becoming the most successful photobook in crowdfunding history and at last my life felt balanced. However, eight months later, on the final day of printing the second-edition of the book in Italy, I found a lump in my breast and was eventually diagnosed with breast cancer. The irony of spending six years creating a book in memory of my mother who died of cancer, for me to then be diagnosed with cancer within months of becoming a mother myself, was simply unimaginable.

And so, this new body of work is inspired by my pregnancy, the development of life in the womb, birth and then abruptly switches to facing my own mortality, cancer and finally my recovery in the wild garden of our old house in the English countryside. It's life, death, love and fear all rolled into one. Just like Wonderland, it will be translated into a fantastical tale, but based on some very painful real-life events. Putting all my emotions into my work is the only way I can make sense of all that has happened. This new project is on a completely different level from anything I have ever attempted before. As well as the photos, we are filming the scenes to make fine art films of it all, so people can experience the characters living and breathing before them. What we have so far is honestly jaw dropping, it has been an incredibly slow process, but it will be worth the long wait - I promise.